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Partnership Or Presence? - Exploring The Complexity Of Community Planning

Stephen Sinclair

ABSTRACT¹

Partnership working between the public, private and third sectors is a defining feature of the contemporary local public policy landscape in the UK. Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) in Scotland involve representatives from different sectors working in partnership, led by the relevant local authority. CPPs resemble local governance reforms elsewhere in the UK and encounter similar problems, among which are difficulties in successfully integrating voluntary sector organisations. This paper draws upon research which explored the influence of voluntary sector participants in relation to community planning processes at the strategic, managerial and operational levels. It examines the suspicion that voluntary sector representatives have a 'mere presence rather than a voice' in local policy making², and explores the potential contribution of Complexity theory to interpret the relationships involved in local partnerships. It is concluded that voluntary sector participants are junior partners in CP and have to adapt how they operate and convince the leading public sector partners that they are business-like in order to exert influence.

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships involving collaboration between the voluntary, community and private sectors have become a defining characteristic of the 'Third Way' in public service reform in Britain (Rummery, 2006), and a key feature of the contemporary policy landscape. This reform of local policy making and service delivery has been described as a shift from local government to local governance (John, 1997). Partnerships have been introduced to develop joined-up policy responses to multi-dimensional problems. They reflect the view that single 'Bureaucracies were designed for a simpler world. Partnerships fit with the complexity of local governance' (Skelcher and Klijn, 2008: 25). However partnerships not only reflect contemporary complexity, they also contribute to it (Sinclair, 2008). Turning a formal partnership between different organisations into a practical reality is not straightforward, and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) provide examples of the issues raised by 'the complex art of steering multiple agencies, institutions and systems which are... operationally autonomous' into a cohesive unit (Jessop, 1997: 114).

The 2003 Local Government in Scotland Act, which made Community Planning (CP) a statutory duty for local authorities and other local public agencies, defined it as 'a process by which the public services provided in the area of the local authority are planned and provided... after consultation among all the public bodies responsible for providing those services; and with such community bodies and other public bodies as is appropriate' (Office of Public Sector Information, nd). CP resembles similar reforms in the other UK nations, such as Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England; Community Strategy Partnerships and the Communities First programme in Wales, and Local Strategy Partnerships in Northern Ireland (Bound, *et al*, 2005). Consequently, reflecting on the experience of implementing CP has relevance to events beyond the borders of Scotland.

The development of such partnerships raises interesting questions about local governance, including:

- how organisations from different sectors and with different remits, perspectives and powers establish effective working relationships?

- how far equal or joint policy making is possible between organisations with different resources, experiences and capacities?
- what are the experience of newcomers to the policy process; e.g. how do voluntary sector representatives adapt to their new role and the responsibilities of partnership policy-making?
- whether it is possible to reconcile efficiency and shared decision-making?

Some commentators are pessimistic about the ability of organisations from different sectors to develop effective partnerships (Sullivan, 2005). In particular, the feasibility of integrating voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) into local governance partnerships has been questioned:

Despite this policy push towards partnership working across sectoral boundaries, the practical experience... suggests that many VCOs [voluntary and community organisations] and local authorities experience difficulties in their relationships with each other. Whilst some of these difficulties may stem from issues such as power imbalance and cultural mismatch, it seems that there is also a general lack of mutual understanding, respect and trust (IdeA, 2006: 9)

This paper explores the politics in practice of CPPs, and examines how the influence of voluntary sector members compares to local authority and other public sector representatives. It also considers the potential value of theories of Complexity to analyse the relationships involved in CP.

COMMUNITY PLANNING AND COMPLEXITY

Advocates of Complexity theory suggest that traditional systems of problem solving and governance are no longer adequate, as they are based on outmoded models of organisational dynamics (Seel, 2000). Complexity theory derives from analyses of dynamic non-linear systems in the natural world, which identified emergent order from unplanned and seemingly disorderly conditions (McElroy, 2000). The Complexity perspective proposes that organisations should be thought of as organic, complex adaptive systems, rather than rational-instrumental problem solving mechanisms (Sanderson, 2006). According to Complexity theorists, the classical organisational dynamics approach has mistakenly assumed that organisations are usually in one stable condition or state or another. In contrast,

Complexity theory suggests that organisations are subject to conflicting tendencies: towards stability through members' desire for security and the imposition of maintenance controls; and, at the same time, towards instability by the attraction of innovation and decentralisation. The outcome is a condition of dynamic and unstable equilibrium. The condition or location of a complex organisation at a particular time is dependent upon its initial conditions but cannot be precisely predicted from these. Complex organisations are not 'in' one position or another for sustained periods, but have tendencies to shift towards contingent stability within a range of broad categories known as attractors (Stacey, 1996). These statuses are shaped in part by members' tacit assumptions about everyday practical operation; in other words, the culture of the organisation. These cultures emerge from and reproduce the organisation in a continuing process of structuration (Giddens, 1984). Organisational cultures are similar to paradigms in that they constitute the practical sense-making frameworks which members typically inhabit, rather than being an external condition upon which they consciously reflect. In short, organisational culture is not imposed from outside but may be understood from within by examining the multiplicity of interactions between members.

Organisational cultures are therefore the collective outcome of individual interactions, and the behaviour of a complex system emerges as the 'holistic sum' of dynamic interaction between its component parts (Reed and Harvey, 1992: 359). This emphasis on the emergent properties of organisations and their irreducibly holistic nature is a defining feature of the Complexity perspective. The other characteristic features may be summarised as follows:

- organisations are in a state of disequilibrium and instability; changes in their operation or outputs are driven by relations of inter-dependence, are adaptive and non-linear
- organisations have emergent properties resulting from members' interactions which are not reducible to its separate components. These components exist in dynamic interaction, and their understanding outcomes requires a whole systems approach
- there is no necessary proportionality between actions and outcomes: changes which result from actions are not always those expected, and small interventions may produce large consequences
- consequently complex systems 'defy the standards of the positivist canons of prediction and explanation' (Reed and Harvey, 1996) and the political and normative dimensions of organisational operation cannot be neglected.

Although offering an interesting theoretical overview, Complexity theory often lacks concrete detail, and to be more than an interesting philosophical perspective requires application to real organisational settings. The analysis of CP is one area where Complexity

theory may offer potential insights. Even in common sense terms, CPPs are complex systems³, and involve introducing new actors into already complicated, dynamic local governance environments. One issue which Complexity theory raises in relation to CPPs is how institutional cultures respond to enforced structural changes: is there resistance against or a shift to new attractor states? In particular, how are the demands of new relationships and mutual adaptation accommodated? To explore this question, the role of VSOs in a CPP is considered in order to examine the influence of culture and participants' respective assumptive worlds, and whether there are signs that CP has effected a paradigm shift among partner organisations. This issue will be explored by considering the negotiation of roles and rights between CP members and their power within the CPP, and whether organisations accepted new operating principles, e.g. how mainstream an activity was CP to each partner and what priority was partnership working accorded?

Previous studies of CP and similar governance reforms have found widespread enthusiasm for partnership and joined-up policy making (Davies, 2009), but it is not clear whether CP is regarded by participants as a central feature of what they do, or an additional task they must perform (Darlow *et al*, 2007: 125). There is evidence of cultural clashes between organisations (Taylor, 2006) and mutual accommodation being inhibited by imbalances of power, particularly the pivotal position occupied by local authorities (Cowell, 2004). Some voluntary and community sector representatives have found participating in local governance partnerships 'highly negative and disempowering', and complain that formal policy-making processes restrict their influence (Diamond, 2008: 162). Finally, the logic of partnership governance 'requires that local government cede part of its powers and role to the VCO sector' (Ross and Osborne, 1999: 58), however doing so challenges established lines of accountability and raises potential conflicts between participants' competing ideas about mandates and legitimacy. For example, Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in England 'appeared to expose tensions between backbench councillors, who are not on the LSP, and VCS representatives, about who had a legitimate claim to represent the community and its needs' (IdeA, 2005: 8). CP can be interpreted as a dissipation of local authority power, and elected members may feel that their community leadership role has been downgraded by partnership working and the increased role accorded the voluntary and private sectors in policy-making (Abram and Cowell, 2004). An Audit Scotland of CP review identified that

certain elected members regarded CP as ‘a threat to their control of services and funding’ (2006, para 80). These issues shed light on just how Complex partnership working can be.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws upon on a study of the experience of voluntary and private sector representatives in a case study CPP in Scotland. The aim of this research was to explore whether voluntary and private sector representatives should be considered core or peripheral members of the CPP, and examine the suspicion that they had a ‘mere presence rather than a voice’ in local policy making (Cameron and Davoudi, 1998: 250). The paper focuses on the position and experience of voluntary sector CP partners; the difficulties of involving private sector organisations in local governance have been discussed in other studies (e.g. Curran *et al*, 2000; Glass *et al*, 2001).

As one CP participant interviewed in this research observed ‘ “Involved” is a word that can have any number of meanings’ when it comes to participation in CP. An organisation’s relative influence within a partnership may be assessed in relation to various areas of activity and competence:

- Strategy - capacity to set priorities and involvement in large-scale system changes
- Resources - influence over budgets and personnel deployment
- Implementation - participation in delivery decisions and processes
- Oversight - extent of management accountability and feedback from delivery issues (Hashagen, 2002)

The study was concerned to explore the respective influence of voluntary and private sector representatives along these dimensions.

A number of considerations were involved in selecting the case study CPP. Relatively few CPPs in Scotland have partner organisations which share coterminous geographic boundaries, and this was reflected in the case study selected. The experience of partnership working prior to the introduction of statutory CP varies between CPPs, and it was considered important to select a case study where there was some track record of voluntary and private sector participation in local governance, so that findings were not excessively distorted by

the likely teething problems involved in initiating an entirely new partnership. Finally, the development in CP has involved several pathfinder studies, process analyses and evaluations, as well as Best Value audits and other performance monitoring studies, and it was considered preferable to select a Partnership which had not been subject to repeated previous analyses.

The project involved a documentary inventory of the case study CPP and interviews with a cross-section of senior figures from the main participants from public, voluntary and private sector CP partners. To gather the views of those outside the CPP, interviews were also undertaken with representatives from the local voluntary and private sectors who were not formally involved in the CPP. Interviews were conducted, between July-October 2007.

The guidance provided to organisations involved in developing CP in Scotland was less prescriptive than that initially issued to other partnerships in the UK (e.g. LSPs in England) (Darlow *et al*, 2007). The consensus view in Scotland was that the appropriate relationships and practices would vary in relation to local circumstances (Scottish Parliament, 2002). Inevitably this has led to variation in the format and operation of the 32 CPPs in Scotland, and there are therefore limitations to the extent to which findings from a single CPP may be considered representative of CPPs more generally.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Principles and power in partnerships

The majority of those interviewed expressed strong support for the principles of CP, and believed that there was a genuine commitment to partnership working. Representatives of public sector organisations affirmed their belief in the value of what one described as ‘using the collective intelligence and experience’ of a range of stakeholders ‘to try and come to a solution’ to local issues. This acceptance of partnership working was less a matter of principle than recognition of the requirements of contemporary service delivery; as one respondent observed: ‘99% of probably what we do is some kind of partnership [sic].’ Many local policy issues are genuinely shared interests which require co-operation, e.g. transport policy involves the interests of several organisations, not least the private sector.

Nevertheless, although seemingly committed to partnership working, CP members still regarded the CPP itself as an entity separate from their own organisations; several distinguished between ‘we’ and ‘they’ - referring to the CPP - during interviews. In relation to Complexity theory, this suggests that partnership working reflected compliance to an external requirement (i.e. environmental adaptation) rather an endogenous impetus to change.

Respondents supported the principle that each member of the main CP board should be granted an equal voice in decision making and claimed that the partnership accorded formal equality to participants. Voluntary sector representatives acknowledged the receptiveness of public sector CP partners to their input; and the importance of the voluntary sector to the partnership was formally recorded in its published minutes. There was no evidence that VSOs’ input to CPP deliberations were restricted to a limited range of issues; as a senior public sector representative said, ‘the voluntary sector could comment on any aspect of the work of the partnership. [There is] ... a desire to ensure that people are there as Board members rather than just being blinkered’.

VSO participants therefore possessed some genuine power within the CPP and were not simply a sounding board for the ideas of others. This influence was reflected in the VSOs’ ability to raise items for discussion, and their right to have any dissent from partnership decisions recorded in minutes. These are not negligible rights: input to the agenda of an organisation or partnership is a crucial means of influencing policy. The right to record disagreement is also a potentially significant source of leverage. Partnerships are likely to prefer consensus decision making and reluctant to publicise internal divisions, which strengthens the possibility that efforts will be made to negotiate compromises and minimise dissent. Therefore, while the influence of voluntary sector partners may not be manifest externally, it is important nonetheless, and was recognised as such by those interviewed.

In relation to Complexity theory, it appears that CP had cultivated a partial shift towards a culture of partnership, if not an entirely new operating mode. However, this interpretation should be qualified. Although all CP partners may have been regarded as formally equal, in reality they were not, and there was general agreement among interviewees that some CP members were more central to the partnership than others. In particular, the local authority were regarded as the driving force of the CPP, and this corresponds to findings from other

studies (Bristow *et al*, 2003). Most partners accepted the centrality of the local authority as inevitable and legitimate; after all, the community leadership role of the local authority is enshrined in the CP legislation. In addition, the local authority possesses a strategic centrality: it is both better able and required to devote more time and resources to CP than other partners. CP is a core business of the council, while it is often only one part of other agencies' remits. Furthermore, some of these other partners may be required to participate in multiple CPPs; for example, the Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board participates in 10 different CPPs (Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007: para 56). This may inhibit the extent to which such organisations can assume a leading role in any particular CPP, although this is a less common experience for VSOs, which tend to cover smaller areas. Nevertheless, several public agencies were perceived as more significant players than VSO representatives. Despite apparent commitment to partnership policy making, in practical terms, the requirements of daily business inevitably meant that organisations with a lead responsibility in a particular area focused on those partners upon whom they depend to function effectively. For example, the local authority required co-operation and joint working with Scottish Enterprise to an extent that it did not depend upon the voluntary sector. Even if the local authority may genuinely wish to involve VSOs, in the end it could often operate without them, whereas it could not do so without other public sector partners. Consequently, there was insufficient impetus to change the culture of everyday working and shift to a new paradigm where VSO members were fully equal partners.

Voluntary sector - playing by the rules

Maloney *et al* (1994) argue that the influence of groups within a partnership depends upon what 'currency' and assets they bring to negotiations. The legitimacy of VSO representatives was accepted by other CP partners because they were regarded as contributing a useful resource. Taylor *et al* (2005: 7) conclude that the assets which enhanced the influence of VSO participants in LSPs included 'good quality evidence (especially in the environment), the ability to come up with good policy ideas, and the ability to deliver on the ground'. Somewhat different factors emerged as significant in the current project. VSOs were perceived by other CP partners as contributing new voices and insights to policy making; as one respondent put it:

I guess they bring in some ways a perspective that might be a little bit closer to some of the ultimate customers ... because in many ways they are quite close to the customers. They inevitably bring an insight into some of the delivery mechanisms.

This is a familiar attribute assumed of VSOs, and while valuable, it portrays them as a source of consultation and feedback rather than an equal partner in policy making (Kelly, 2007). Another reason why VSO representatives were accepted as legitimate CP partners was because it was recognised that they had established procedures through which they were representative of and accountable to their sector. VSO representatives in other studies have emphasised the legitimacy and local accountability which they believed they brought to local governance partnerships (Barnes *et al*, 2008). Although this might be interpreted as an alternative way of referring to the 'customer voice' which the VSO contributed, it is significant that the VSO interviewees highlighted issues of principle - their democratic accountability - while public sector respondents took a more instrumental view, which focused on VSOs' practical contribution.

There were subtle but significant conditions attached to the influence which VSO representatives were granted. Despite accepting the legitimacy and value of VSOs' participation in CP, public agencies were clear about the purpose of this and the demarcation of authority. Local authority respondents in particular emphasised their distinctive responsibilities - 'keepers of the public purse' as one respondent put it - and the authority that came from their democratic accountability. Respondents from the public sector were adamant that the participation in CP of voluntary, community or private sector organisations should not be allowed to compromise the duties of public agencies. In the assumptive worlds of public sector partners, CP was a means to improve policy making by drawing upon a wider range of contributors; it was not regarded as an alternative to existing mandates or legal responsibilities.

Indeed, the principal change in outlook that was required was on the part of VSO participants. A majority of respondents commented independently that an important requirement for non-public sector CP partners to be taken seriously and exercise influence within the partnership was the need to be 'professional' rather than adversarial in their relationship to others. A recurring observation was that VSOs had to learn to be business like

to make what were regarded as effective contributions, and this view was expressed by VSO respondents themselves; as one such put it,

you don't get anywhere by shouting your mouth off... if you don't work alongside them [CP partners], they don't want to listen... and I think you have got to work alongside them and be one of them, and you have got to be very professional about it.

The relative professionalism of VSO representatives was contrasted favourably by some public sector respondents with the approach of local community groups and activists, some of which were regarded as confrontational, unrealistic in their expectations, and not genuinely representative of local opinion. Unlike the VSO representatives, these groups and individuals were regarded as a potential problem to be handled rather than a partner in CP.

This requirement to be professional may require adjustment on the part of some VSOs (Lewis, 2005). The mode of operating among many voluntary organisations tends to be, in the words of one interviewee 'organic, amorphous and unstructured'. To operate within a partnership which requires regular and structured processes may not sit easily with some VSOs' existing cultures. Other studies of local governance partnerships have recorded reluctance among some VSOs to engage on other organisations' terms, and an attachment to 'the old way where they knew where they were' (Taylor, *et al*, 2005: 6). This outlook was not evident in the case study CPP, but it raises interesting issues about whether and how the distinctive identity and independence of the voluntary sector may be preserved within local governance partnerships.

This question is reinforced by the level of support and assistance provided by public agencies to the local voluntary sector. It has been noted that 'community governance requires a real commitment from local government to build the capacity of local VSOs to participate in planning and implementation fora' (Ross and Osborne, 1999: 58). In this case study, the CPP (principally through the local authority) had devoted considerable resources to the development of the voluntary sector. Indeed, the level of assistance provided was such that the local VSO representative organisations was virtually a creation of the local authority and public sector partners. While nurturing the voluntary sector in this way demonstrates the local authority's readiness to engage with new partners, it also raises the question of how far

VSOs in this case study were genuinely independent. As one interviewee commented, there is the danger in this that VSO representatives 'become almost the professional face' of the sector and different from those 'on the ground' outside the CPP. The risk that VSO representatives become perceived as compromising their independence and stifle their alternative viewpoint is a sensitive issue within the voluntary sector, but an inevitable consequence of increasing VSO and community participation in local governance (Diamond, 2008). It is clear that VSO representatives face a difficult juggling act - they must become and behave like public sector partners while remaining responsive and accountable to a voluntary sector which may retain an outsider's orientation towards public policy.

Partnership behind closed doors

While equality of formal participation existed between organisations in the CPP, this did not overcome the reality of unequal power and resources. This becomes more evident when relationships beyond formal processes are considered. In analysing relative influence within any organisation it is important to identify where key policy decisions are taken and which agents are represented on the relevant groups. In the case study CPP, the main CP board operated as an executive body, in the sense that it possessed the final authority for ratifying policy; however it dealt with strategic issues rather than matters of detail. Initiating issues and developing policy occurred in groups below the main board level. In particular, much of the development of policy and preparation preceding decisions took place within what were known (as they are in several CPPs) as Officers groups and Thematic groups. As one respondent explained: 'The Officers Group is where the bulk of the work gets done and propositions put forward, so [the main Board] would be signing things off, to an extent.'

It was therefore important for CP organisations to have a voice at the right level and be represented on the appropriate groups to influence policy. However, this was a source of influence which VSOs felt they had been denied, until recently. Furthermore, the voluntary sector felt that they 'had to fight' to achieve such representation as it had, and securing it was perceived to have contributed to the increased capacity of VSO representatives to become more involved in the partnership.

The criteria for membership of Theme and Officers groups appeared to be the relative centrality of the issue to the core business of the organisation, balanced against leading partners' desire to keep the number of organisations represented to what was felt to be a manageable number. However this involved the risk that organisations not included in groups developing policy on issues where they had an interest felt that their influence was compromised and the scope of subsequent discussion foreclosed. One expression of this sentiment was the belief that those not represented on key groups and initial discussions had less opportunity to influence subsequent decisions. VSO respondents reiterated a preference for early access to information and input to relevant papers circulated to the main board. As one VSO participant said, 'I think we would like to be more involved at the earlier stages when it comes to the formation of policy. It would be quite good to be involved in that earlier stage, so we don't have to be involved more when it is a closed document, which even although it says "draft"... it is harder to change it.' VSO respondents also argued that they required more time than other CP partners to digest and respond to policy issues, as they did not have the management processes nor support staff available to assist public sector representatives with this.

Another factor which influenced the relative capacity of CP partners to shape policy was the extent to which they made use of informal relationships and processes to take decisions, and which partners were involved in these networks. This appeared to be an important factor in the CPP; as one interviewee said: 'a partnership meeting it is not very formal... you will see real dialogue outwith the main meeting between people who know each other'. Another participant confirmed this: 'There is probably a limited number of decisions that require input from a wide range of partners. More often than not, I would say, it is two possibly three, partners working together, and so you would set something up to resolve those issues outwith the CPP Board.'

Making use of informal processes and abbreviated communication can be a sign of a mature and effective partnership, but it entails the potential hazard of inadvertently excluding those not 'in the loop'. Reflecting this, some VSO representatives expressed concern that some partnership discussions and decisions had taken place 'behind closed doors' and restricted their potential influence.

THE COMPLEXITY OF COMMUNITY PLANNING

Identifying the relative power and influence of the different CP partners is not straightforward. There were few overt manifestations of power in the case study - neither force nor coercion was evident in relations between organisations. Instead, there was a largely shared but unspoken understanding of respective rights and relative capacity among partners. This culture had evolved through iterative adaptation and mutual adjustment rather than either being articulated in formal procedures or the result of overt conflicts and power struggles (Taylor *et al*, 2005).

These findings suggest that there was a gap between public sector partners' willingness in principle to engage with voluntary sector CP participants, and the practical conditions which limited the extent of such groups' influence within the partnership. The net effect of these conditions is that while CP in this case study represented a more inclusive system of decision-making, it did not mark a significant shift in power among local stakeholders nor a new operational paradigm. Voluntary sector representatives had more than mere presence in the CPP, but they were junior members of the partnership.

It was also a condition of VSOs being regarded as an effective participant and exercising voice within the CPP was that they had to accept the terms of engagement of mainstream partners. While VSO participants were able to partially shape the decisions of the CPP, they were themselves reconfigured in the process. A paradox of VSO involvement in CP is that they were more likely to be taken seriously and exert influence to the extent that they became similar to the main public agencies. Indeed, in the CPP studied, the voluntary sector representative organisation effectively had to be reconstituted by the CPP to make it fit for the requirements of partnership.

The main public sector organisations in this study regarded CP instrumentally - they focused on delivery, and saw it as a means to an end rather than of value in itself. Partnership and VSO participation were considered important only in so far as they contributed to better performance and delivering outcomes. CP was regarded as a policy-making and implementation mechanism, and anything distracting from that was dismissed.

Nevertheless, even in these pragmatic terms there was a tension between partnership decision-making and administrative efficiency. For example, the understandable interest in keeping CP processes business-like and outcome rather than process focused, limited the scope of discussion and some partner's capacity to influence decisions. These conflicting demands were one source of friction between public and voluntary sector CP partners. The evidence indicated that the bottom line of getting on with business was prioritised by the public sector members which dominated the CPP, and the pragmatic acceptance of this on the part of VSO representatives was a clear indication of the limits of their influence.

The research also confirms findings from other studies of the need to consider the informal processes and relationships upon which partnerships depend (Russell, 2008). Although underpinned by legislation and statutory guidance, in practice CP is an improvised process, implemented by individuals embedded in specific relationships shaped by local history and circumstances (Stevenson, 2002). Accounts of CP which abstract from this messy, contingent and inter-personal reality to make general points inevitably lose something of their accuracy and validity. This reaffirms the potential value of Complexity theory, which highlights the significance of context and path dependency in shaping organisational development (Byrne, 2008). In this case, the lack of capacity of VSOs was one factor explaining why CP did not produce a shift from one contingent and dynamic paradigm to another.

Another implication of the Complexity approach is the importance of understanding the assumptive worlds of different participants. In this case, the primacy attached by public sector agencies to process efficiency and outcome delivery (while understandable in relation to performance monitoring regimes) was a factor explaining relative organisational inertia. There was no active resistance to CP among key participants, but acceptance was conditional and subject to the proviso that any new inter-organisational relationships should not disrupt existing cultures in favour of untested ideas and practices (Scottish Executive, 2002: para 14).

CONCLUSIONS

One implication of complexity theory is that a more sophisticated but more modest approach to public service reform may be required. Public sector reform fails on occasion not necessarily because of active resistance among those effected, but because of the inherent Complexity of organisational cultures. Macro-structural blue-prints for reform encounter a problem of level-shift: the converse of organisations possessing emergent properties which cannot be reduced to individual components is that relationships and everyday interactions within organisation cannot be reformulated by general strategic plans. Centralised reforms often apply a simplified mechanical model which does not reflect the organic nature of CPPs. Reforming organisations is not like pulling a lever which operates crankshafts and cogs, but more like manoeuvring a boat amidst eddies and ripples. Organisations in such conditions cannot be directed by instructions to change, but new cultures can be fostered within them so that they become inclined to move in particular directions (Capra, 2003).

Organisational reforms which attempt to significantly alter cultures and everyday working practices are more likely to succeed if implemented cautiously: ‘in situations of unmanageable complexity, practice in matters of public policy is often guided more effectively by localized experimental trial-and-error’ (Rescher, 1998: 189). Promoting local autonomy, adaptation and experimentation entails political risks, but is ultimately more likely to produce valued and sustainable outcomes than trying to impose general prescriptions. While ‘Mainstreaming voluntary organisations such that they become *equal* partners, shaping the agenda as well as the implementation, is not a likely prospect’, it is impossible to say, short of this, what the limits of voluntary sector involvement and influence within local governance partnerships may be (Lewis, 2005: 128). These limits will be discovered by partners pushing at existing boundaries and creatively learning what is involved in making and being a partnership.

Notes

¹. This research informing this paper was funded by the Nuffield Foundation Small Grants Scheme.

². Cameron and Davoudi, 1998: 250

³. As an illustration of this see the diagram of a typical CPP on the Scottish Government website - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/community-planning> or in Audit Scotland, 2006.

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